

Communications Workers of America Oral History Project

Interviewee: Rechenbach, Jeff – Part II

Interviewer: Debbie Goldman

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Debbie [00:00:00] This is Debbie Goldman. I'm in Washington, D.C. The date is September 9th, 2024. We're turning the tables and I'm interviewing Jeff Rechenbach in Cleveland, Ohio and Hannah Goldman, our producer, is in Brooklyn, New York. We are doing this over zoom. Jeff was first interviewed almost a year ago by John McKerley. That interview took us from his birth through his period as a local president at age 19 and then his appointment in 1981 to staff in District Four. Then we also talked with Jeff when we interviewed Larry Cohen in early January of 2024. Jeff supplemented that [Larry Cohen interview] with some stories when he was vice-president in District Four. But we really have not had the opportunity to hear about the major challenges and achievements and changes that Jeff led as District vice-president, then as executive vice-president of the national union and secretary- treasurer. So that's the purpose of this particular interview. Jeff, let's begin then. When were you elected?

Jeff [00:01:52] I was elected as vice-president of District Four, which consists of the states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin as the result of the merger of two districts that existed earlier. [I began my term] in 1994. Bob Johnson had been the vice-president up until that time. I was the administrative assistant. He retired midterm. I was appointed by the board and then elected at a convention and then reelected for a full term at a subsequent convention. Both times without opposition, I'm fortunate to say.

Debbie [00:02:37] And just so we can bookend it. You were district V.P. from [19]94 until when?

Jeff [00:02:44] Until 2005.

Debbie [00:02:47] Okay. So quite a period. That was a period of a lot of change in the district and the local telephone companies and in the union. Tell us some of the major changes that you had to deal with.

Jeff [00:03:09] So it seems like ancient history now. The biggest change was the complete shift in the telecommunications industry from a highly regulated industry to a virtually unregulated industry and all of the subsequent fallout of that. Divestiture [1984 break-up of AT&T], re-vestiture, companies splitting and then coming back together and all of the pains of going through that process for our membership. It also was a period where the union really looked outward more than I think we had in the past. I think for the most part we had been fairly content to be strictly a telephone workers union. There were obviously some other units that were included in the union at that time, most notably out of District One where there was more of an organizing culture at play. And with the election of Morty Bahr as president [1985] and then Larry Cohen as an executive vice-president sometime later. That organizing culture really began to take hold across the country. That was happening at the same time that we were feeling the contraction within the telecommunications industry.

Jeff [00:04:40] We also were, I don't know if looking for merger partners is the right way, but we were open to welcoming merger partners of other unions that for one reason or another were looking for somebody to partner with in their attempts to continue to function as a union. A number of those mergers occurred during this time frame as well. So it was really a period within CWA that turned the page on a union that had been, for all intents and purposes, from the [19]40s up until I'll say the late [19]70s, strictly telephone-focused and carried that moniker. In fact I recall, I don't remember what my role was at the time, but the battle over changing the logo of CWA. The logo of CWA for years that was focused on a telephone and a teletype key and these instruments that related to the telecommunications industry. The president at the time, Glen Watts, wanted to change the logo to make it more welcoming to other workers and so shifted to just a CWA logo, sort of a stylized version of the three letters CWA. There was a huge fight at the convention to overturn that

because all of these traditionalists just were appalled that we would walk away from our telephone roots. To me that sort of characterized the shift that was taking place within CWA. This notion that we are employer-fixated versus worker-fixated.

Jeff [00:06:54] So we were really trying to make that change and Glen was trying to do that in his way. I think he saw what was happening. Great success organizing in New Jersey public workers. Obviously, as I mentioned, President Morty Bahr really instilled that culture the rest of the way. So it's been a challenge at times to get the union to focus on what a union is versus what a connection to an employer means to workers. I think we've navigated that over the course of my career. I'm not claiming any credit for that. But I think generationally we've overcome that and it feels like a more welcoming place than just, how do I fit into this telephone union? You know, I'm glad I've got a union, but I really don't feel at home here. I was at a convention a couple of years ago and seeing workers from all different lines of work having their voices heard and ironically, at the end, when we have appeals, not having all the appeals dominated by telephone issues and not having all of the chatter around the convention being around telecom issues but rather about worker issues and worker-related fights that we might have to be involved in. So it's been quite a period of change.

Debbie [00:08:43] I think you've captured that very well and of course, you've jumped way beyond just the period that you were District V.P.

Jeff [00:08:50] Yes.

Debbie [00:08:51] I just wanted to add one little detail about the logo. My memory is that change did not actually happen until sometime in the 2000s, maybe 2010. And it just happened. Now the logo just says CWA and there was no vote on it or anything like that. But I think you've captured it. Let's go back a little bit to that [19]94 through 2005 period, which I think you've captured very well. District Four was focused on the bargaining then with Ameritech. And during the period that you were there, Ameritech was bought by SBC [in 1999], so you had to go through that. That was really a period after the 1996 Telecommunications Act when competition came to the local telephone companies. So you had to go through that. You also mentioned mergers and I'd be interested to hear the role you might have played, particularly, I think with the IUE [International Union of Electrical Workers], which was based in Ohio, I think.

Jeff [00:10:14] Right.

Debbie [00:10:15] Why don't we start first with the IUE merger, if you had a role with that, and then we can move on to some of the other mergers of Ameritech and changes within District Four itself.

Jeff [00:10:30] So I wasn't really aware of merger talks with IUE until I got a call from President Bahr saying, hey, we're thinking about merging with the IUE, the International Union of Electronic Workers, I think is what the moniker stands for.

Debbie [00:10:47] Electrical workers.

Jeff [00:10:48] Electrical workers. Okay. And they're based in Ohio, which I knew. I served on the Ohio AFL-CIO executive board with some of the leadership of the IUE. They were based out of Dayton, Ohio, but had a huge presence in a couple of other locations around northeast Ohio as well. So I knew some of the leadership on the periphery. I wouldn't say that I was close with any of them. But Morty called up and said, hey, we're contemplating this. Would you sit down with some of these folks and discuss with them what the differences are and how you think they could be

assimilated into CWA. So I did that. I made a point of going in and visiting with Mike Bindas, who was one of the key leaders at the time and Ed Fire as well. And it was interesting. They were sort of frozen in this notion of being a union exactly where they were. They didn't have a great vision of growth. They also seemed much more caught up in the trappings of leadership, particularly in the case of Mike Bindas. He was, I don't know if this is out of school, but when I sat down with him, his questions focused on what's the salary of a CWA vice-president? What kind of cars do the staff drive at CWA? It seemed more focused on what he was interested in personally. Now, that wasn't the case with Ed Fire and a number of the other leaders that I talked with.

Jeff [00:13:00] So I reported that back to Morty and we proceeded with the merger [in 2000]. I think at the time they were the probably the largest group that we had brought in to CWA. I'm trying to think now in terms of merger partners. And so we were trying to work that out. And also from my perspective, it was a big shift in the makeup of my district. Because now here was this group that had a lot of membership within District Four and there's an electoral process at play as well. So what does that do to my chances of being reelected? But it made sense. Certainly made a lot of sense for the IUE and I think it made sense for CWA as well. I thought it might give us a little more foothold into organizing in manufacturing. Obviously not having the foresight to see the dive that manufacturers would be taking over the course of the next ten years. And obviously, that probably was a big part of why they wanted to merge. They saw that coming and we didn't. I don't think we've ever really capitalized on the merger with the IUE in the way that we thought we could by being able to use them as leverage to organize more diverse groups in the country.

Debbie [00:14:47] Why did IUE have an interest in coming into CWA?

Jeff [00:14:55] I think there were financial issues that they were struggling with.

Debbie [00:14:59] Why CWA and not another union?

Jeff [00:15:04] Part of it has to be the leadership. Morty Bahr is an incredibly charismatic leader and I think a lot of these mergers were at some large measure on the strength of his personality. I really believe that he could make anybody feel comfortable and engage with them on issues that they cared about in a meaningful way. He just had a great ability to do that. [Larry] Cohen had some of that similar ability to go in-depth about issues, but he didn't have that personality that Morty had. Morty was the guy you'd like to sit down have dinner with. Larry was the guy you'd like to have lecture you on economics. And so it was just a real contrast between the two. But I think Morty's personality was so engaging that he made people feel comfortable and welcoming. He really did a masterful job then making the new merger partners feel comfortable at the board. For example, I know a lot of board members sort of resented the fact that Ed Fire, who was the president of the IUE, still referred to himself as president of the IUE. Well, you're a vice-president of CWA now, you're not president of the IUE. But at board meetings, Morty would always refer when he was calling on Ed Fire, he'd say, President Fire. Looking at that it just struck me that this is how you do that. He recognizes that the sentiment around that boardroom is going in a different direction but he wants to make that individual feel welcome and a part of this union and really worked at doing that. I think that rubbed off on a lot of us. I think that notion of being open to new ideas and new partners really took root with a lot of us on the board as time went by.

Debbie [00:17:27] As I recall in this period CWA also represented the Western Electric manufacturing plants. In our interviews, when we talked with Ralph Maly, the closings had not yet begun and there was this thought that maybe those manufacturing plants that were in CWA and the IUE [would create synergy to organize other manufacturing sites]. As I recall, the IUE's big strength was representing folks at General Electric factories, making refrigerators and other big appliances.

Talk briefly about how as they [the IUE] came into the union, what did that mean in terms of District Four and whether you were able or not able to integrate them into what was still at that point predominantly an Ameritech-represented group.

Jeff [00:18:29] Yes. So, I think just taking a page from Morty's book, I made a point of making myself as available as possible to the IUE leadership, but also giving them a wide berth in decision-making. The one big overlap that we had was in politics. They had their own political operation. We had ours. And so, we'd have to coordinate giving to candidates. I tried to be as deferential as I could to their leadership and their needs and work with them. And it worked out. You just have to try hard to make people feel as welcome and comfortable as you possibly can to build up their trust level. I think we established that pretty early on. Part of it, again as I said, I made myself available to go to their local union meetings, their district conferences, and be welcoming in those environments as well. And so there was never a political internal issue within CWA with the integration of the IUE. They were always very supportive of my leadership in the Midwest, and I was likewise supportive of their role as a full merger partner at the table and in the boardroom at CWA.

Debbie [00:20:14] I don't want to interrupt you.

Jeff [00:20:17] No, go ahead. I would have just rambled there so that's a good spot to stop me.

Debbie [00:20:22] Let's talk about the bargaining that you did and let's talk about the merger when SBC came in. There had to be a lot of changes. How did you exert leadership during the merger conversations? What was it that you wanted out of the merger? And what did you get?

Jeff [00:20:54] So --

Debbie [00:20:59] As you're thinking -- I'm thinking this is around 2003. I can check, but maybe even a little earlier. [It was 1999]

Jeff [00:21:09] That sounds in the right realm. I tried to look at all of the mergers and changes as opportunities for leverage. Some of those took place even before the merger with SBC. So Ameritech spins off from AT&T, becomes this Midwest phone company basically that encompassed exactly the District Four region which used to be the District Four and District Five merged together.

Debbie [00:21:45] So that's 1984 divestiture.

Jeff [00:21:48] Right. Ameritech was sort of struggling to find its identity as well. Each of these Baby Bells, as they called them at the time, was trying to figure out what their identity was and they also wanted to be the one that came out at the top of the heap. So they were all making these different plays to try and make that happen. One of the plays that Ameritech was focused on was internationally. They were looking for the opportunity to buy some phone companies that were government-owned in different countries, particularly in Europe. And so with the level of unionization in Europe, unions there could play a role in whether or not these mergers, these buyouts, could actually take place. And so Ameritech would come to me and say, hey, would you be willing to talk to the union leadership in Denmark about whether or not they would support Ameritech buying them out? And I was, for a price. The price was always something from the bargaining table. I wanted something in return from them for the membership at Ameritech in the Midwest. On two different occasions I went and spoke to international leadership about Ameritech and on one occasion, Morty came along as well. But again, both times trying to leverage whatever

happened to be on the table at the time. I wish I could remember specifically what some of the things were. I think retiree health care was an issue at one point. They also bought up the Hungarian telephone company. That was an interesting one because the union leadership over there were all Communists from years gone by. They were very hardcore. Meeting with them was really interesting. I really sort of enjoyed my time with them although it was quite a different experience from anything that I worked through. Their union meetings were at 9:00 in the morning. I'm not sure how they did that. I guess maybe it was like a stewards conference or something, the equivalent of what we might have here or a regional meeting. But the leadership, they said we'd like to meet at seven to prepare for the meeting. So yeah all right. So 7 a.m. I get over to the hall where the union meeting is going to be held and they've got like offices behind the hall and I'm in there with probably a dozen or so all male leadership. There weren't any women leaders in the Hungarian company. The Danish company was much, much more diverse. And the 7:00 meeting was to do shots before this meeting. And I'm not a drinker, but I'm also trying to win their support because I've got something at play back in the Midwest that I want from Ameritech. And so I did a few shots with them in the morning. Fortunately, I speak no Hungarian of course, and I had a translator so whatever I said from the podium to this group, I was completely dependent on the translator making some sense of it. I hope that that he did. But anyway, it was a different world, I guess.

Debbie [00:26:13] Right. Great, great story. I remember when a few of the Baby Bells thought that they could expand internationally and eventually that collapsed.

Jeff [00:26:29] But then go to SBC. That was really the big one and that was the one that I was frankly most excited about and principally because all of the Baby Bells were getting into the wireless business and we were trying to organize the wireless side of the house and trying to do what we could to get membership there. And in District Six, which was the Southwestern Bell district, headquartered in Texas at the time in San Antonio, Ed Whitacre was the CEO there and he had agreed with CWA District Six leadership that we could have card check for the wireless part of the industry. What that means is if we in a particular group show that a majority of the workers by signing a card saying they wanted to be part of CWA, that they would in turn recognize the union and not force us to go to an election, which is a long, drawn-out process and fraught with opportunity for the employer to meddle.

Debbie [00:27:49] And I would add, they had agreed to neutrality, which was also key.

Jeff [00:27:54] That's right. So this was a big deal. And so while a lot of the local leadership within CWA in the Ameritech region were opposed to that, and I would say principally on sort of just this parochial view, they didn't want to be headquartered out of Texas. It took some convincing to get the locals to recognize that this was really an opportunity for us. And obviously one of the principal caveats that I had to have if I was going to go to some of the legislatures around the Midwest and talk to them about this merger and advocate for the merger was that we would have card check and neutrality as part of that package. And they agreed to that. And again, I'll credit the leadership of Morty and Larry Cohen for being the higher level there, being the conduit between District Six and District Four. I shouldn't say District Six and District Four, between SBC and Ameritech to make sure that became a reality. But we made it very, very clear that we could block this merger, that we would do everything we could to block this merger if there wasn't that agreement in place. And they were a bit reluctant to do it. Dick Notebaert was the CEO of Ameritech at the time. He was actually a decent guy to work with, but he didn't believe in this card check neutrality agreement that District Six had come up with. But ultimately now for the sake of the merger, acquiesced and we got that agreement. So then that meant I had to keep my part of the bargain. That meant going to the various legislatures, both myself and the staff and even some of the key locals, talking to legislators in some instances, interacting with Public Utility Commissions because each one of the individual state

commissions had to approve this merger in order for it to go forward. It was sort of odd bedfellows because you'd be in there lobbying along with telephone company lobbyists, many of whom were making huge sums of money for doing this work. They hired all kinds of outside lobbying firms to come in. And I'm thinking to myself, the contrast of why a local leader or even myself is in this room, trying to do something on behalf of workers and this hired gun is in here who just as easily if somebody paid them more would be on the other side of this issue. It wasn't lost on me and made an impression on some of the local leaders that were doing that work as well. But anyway, at the end of the day, the merger was approved. SBC became owners of the Ameritech region. And we got card check and immediately put it to work.

Jeff [00:31:42] Some of the organizers that we had on staff and the staff reps just did a great job of sweeping in and organizing big call centers, phone stores, the AT&T phone stores now but Cingular Wireless was the company at the time before it became branded with AT&T. [They] spent a lot of know time doing some great work getting those workers organized and I feel really very good about that. The other part of it, a little side note on that. One of the things I was concerned about. This is for all intents and purposes relatively new work for a lot of these telephone locals. They didn't have workers that did this kind of work in their old telephone company structures. It was similar work to what they had. I mean, if you're in a call center for Cingular Wireless, you could just as easily be in a call center at any of the Bell companies. But I was concerned about how they would be treated within the existing structure of locals. And so one of the things I did when trying to figure out where these new units would be housed or domiciled within a local was to -- For example, in the state of Ohio, we had a call center down in Columbus so that was the bulk of the workers [in that local]. But then all the phone stores [were] scattered all around the state. I put them all together into the Columbus local so that they would have a real voice within a local versus, okay, there's two phone stores in Toledo, Ohio, that have a total of 18 workers. What kind of voice are they going to have for their issues? I just felt it was important for them if they came into this group to have a vibrant voice. The geography was an issue. But the local, I think, managed that very well. And as a result, I think they feel much more a part of the union because they have a louder voice versus just being sort of chopped up into little pieces all across the state. We did that in a couple of different states. There were a few that it didn't work out. There wasn't like a big call center to sort of be the anchor. But where it did, I think it helped to assimilate those members into the union much more quickly and in much more meaningful way.

Debbie [00:34:45] I think you've raised a really important point that I would have asked which is sometimes there's this experience where the leadership of a local doesn't really want the newcomers in because that might challenge them politically. My memory is that we had that challenge with bringing in the wireless workers. And by the way, when you say the phone stores, just so that our listeners will know, we're really talking about the wireless retail outlets, by their point, landline did not have retail stores. So that was new. And of course, the workforce in wireless flipped the numbers in landline. [In wireless] you had very few technicians. It was call centers and retail stores. So it sounds like you deliberately worked to integrate these newcomers as opposed to them not being integrated into the locals.

Jeff [00:35:51] You could see the incredible growth in that industry. It was just leaps and bounds and it just made a lot of sense that they would try and keep that identity. I can think of an example that took place, sort of in a similar realm. We were organizing some hospital workers in Marion, Ohio, and it was a really tough struggle. Nasty fight. Got the community involved and the board of directors of the hospital, we went after them and finally got an agreement to recognize the union. And then they went into the Marion, Ohio local. Well all of a sudden there was this big number of workers, this big block of votes, if you will, that was now coming in to the Marion local. And unfortunately, over just a period of years, the local just let that unit die on the vine. They decertified

after 5 or 6 years and we lost that and all the cachet that we built up within that community was lost as a result. That happened after I'd left, well we organized while I was there, but they eventually lost it. But that sense of having to consciously build a structure or put together a plan to make new workers feel welcome in the union was important if we were going to grow this union. You couldn't just put them on a shelf somewhere and say, okay, look, we did that. And so I was very conscious of that with all of the different mergers that we had over the years.

Debbie [00:37:57] Who was your organizing director?

Jeff [00:38:00] Seth Rosen, who eventually became my successor then as vice-president.

Debbie [00:38:06] And I think the two of you worked together very hard and made District Four known as an organizing district.

Jeff [00:38:14] Well, Seth was brilliant. He was really just such a creative thinker, such as strategic thinker. I just can't say enough about his ability to analyze and figure out solutions to problems. I was really fortunate to have a great support team. I am absolutely convinced that I was able to move up within the ranks of CWA because of those people, not so much on my ability, but their ability to build the union within the district. Seth was a big part of that. I had another assistant, Sal La Cause and Sal was the political guy. He was the guy that could go out and make some of the telephone folks feel good about where we were going and Seth was the guy that was taking us there. So, Seth was the guy driving the bus and Sal was the guy making the people on the bus feel comfortable about where we were going. And Dodie Ditmar, who was my assistant for so many years, was terrific in the political realm. She knew every legislator. They knew her. And also sort of brought comfort to some of the telecom folks about what their role in a very dramatically changing union. So it was a great team. I had genuinely hoped that Seth would be the president of CWA at some point in his career. Unfortunately, he tragically passed away in an accident on vacation.

Debbie [00:40:20] And you and Seth go back to your local. Correct?

Jeff [00:40:23] Yes. We go back. He came out of my local. I don't want to brag about my local but we had some really talented people come out of that local. John Ryan is another one. He's the chief assistant to Senator Sherrod Brown right now. So there is some great talent. And ironically, at one point we were on opposite sides of an issue. I was on the staff. Marty Hughes was the vice-president at the time. Their local had voted to split and Marty supported the split and they didn't. So we were sort of at odds. But maybe that experience, upon reflection, was positive because it really gave me a chance to just see how talented some of these leaders were. Ryan and Rosen, they were brilliant strategists and you just kind of marveled at the work they did with very little resources. So as soon as we had an opportunity when Bob Johnson became vice-president and we were looking for somebody to come on as an organizer, I immediately suggested Seth, even though we had been at odds for a few years because you could just see the talent. He just was a very bright, bright guy and so -- The union is at a loss because he isn't still around for us so.

Debbie [00:42:11] And a great sense of humor too.

Jeff [00:42:14] Oh for sure and a great musician by the way if we're adding on platitudes there. A funny story. So we're in Wisconsin and we had a staff rep up there Tom Verkuilen who was really a good guy. We're driving somewhere and Seth's in the car and Tom and myself and I think Sal La Cause probably. I have no idea where we're driving to, that's not important to the story. But Seth was in a band and they had recorded a few CD's and I don't remember if it was a CD or cassette tape at the time. But whatever it was, Tom says, why don't you pop one in, we'll listen to it. So we

put one in and it was kind of this bluesy-based music. The conversation went, what'd you think of it? And Tom said gee, I thought it was really good. But that female singer, she's not that great. And Sal and I are biting our lip because we know the female singer in the band is Seth's wife. (laughs) And we're waiting trying to figure out how Seth's going to handle this and and I forget how it finally came up. And Verkuilen just, blushed horribly. Anyway, I'm digressing. That has nothing to do with the oral history.

Debbie [00:43:54] It's a great story.

Jeff [00:43:55] We can cut that out and move on from there. But it was just a really funny moment, and Seth, who had a great sense of humor, got a big kick out of it as well. And by the way, his wife is a terrific singer, so I'm not sure where Tom was going with that. But she's very talented. I think he just didn't like that bluesy sort of sound.

Debbie [00:44:17] So we could spend many hours talking about your time as district VP. Before we move on, is there anything else that you really want to highlight from that period?

Jeff [00:44:33] I think it was -- so we transitioned. We had Marty Hughes, who was a very autocratic leader. It was his way or no way. Then you had Bob Johnson come on after Marty. And there was kind of this relief within the district that Marty was gone. Bob had a much more sort of welcoming way about him. We had just merged the two districts together, so there was a little animosity from that. Marty had run against the District Five vice-president and defeated him in the election. Then when I became vice-president, what I was trying to do at that point was build a structure for the future. Recognizing that in the past you tended to have people that came on staff late in their career and spend a few years in a staff job and then you could move into retirement. had come onto the staff at a very young age. I was I think 27, 28 when I came on staff. I thought we really need to sort of grab talent when we can where we can. And so I made it a point of not just diversifying the staff, which I very proudly did. I'm trying to think if there were any men that I appointed to staff. I'm sure there were. But mostly women. A number of African-Americans.

Debbie [00:46:25] Who were they?

Jeff [00:46:27] Annie Crump. Linda Hinton. Gosh. The guy from Detroit. You know, now you're going to embarrass me because you're asking me to come up with these names. Gosh.

Debbie [00:46:42] It'll come to you.

Jeff [00:46:44] Susan Baxter Fleming.

Debbie [00:46:48] Who was active organizing Indiana University.

Jeff [00:46:52] Right. Right.

Debbie [00:46:53] Without going down that rabbit hole. But we think we should highlight that.

Jeff [00:46:59] That's right.

Debbie [00:46:59] You did a lot of organizing of public sector universities.

Jeff [00:47:04] One of the things that Seth and I did was, for example, at Indiana University, when we were making house calls, we assigned each of the staff to go down there for a week or two and

make these house calls as well. So even though you weren't an organizing staff, you went down to Indiana University and knocked on doors. I did it as well. I thought culturally it was the right thing to do. I feel very good about the leadership team that I put in place. I think they were very forward thinking. I think they had a great vision for where CWA could go and a strategy for how to get there. And then when I left, Dodie Ditmar was going to retire. And so the two administrative assistants I had Sal La Cause and Seth Rosen both wanted to become vice-president. Sal was probably my best friend in the world. But I felt Seth was the better person for the job and so I supported Seth in the election, and I still think it was right decision. And on reflection, later on Sal acknowledged that it was the right call. Sal became Seth's assistant and the two of them had a great partnership for a few years before Sal became too ill to continue on and retired early. But that was sort of my approach.

Jeff [00:48:49] And it was also my approach when Morty Bahr announced he was going to retire and a number of board members encouraged me to run for president and I'm not sure where that came from. Part of it may have been out of a sense of, I'm a telephone person and Larry Cohen, who is going to be also running for president, doesn't come from the telephone base. So Larry and I sat down and talked about it. And to me, there was never a question. I was going to be supporting Larry Cohen. He was the better choice for the job. He was this great strategic thinker. He's a lot like Seth, not quite the same personality as Seth. But, as you know, just a brilliant, smart guy. I can recall going with him to meet with various CEOs from time to time. The CEO of AT&T, SBC and Larry could engage with them on their economics like nobody else could. When he was going to meet with these people, he knew what their bottom line was, he knew how much they spent on everything, he knew what the projections were. And so to me, this was like no choice, it was a no brainer to me. And so we agreed to run as a team. He would run as president. I would run as executive vice-president, which was the job he was vacating to run for president. Barbara Easterling was the incumbent secretary-treasurer [and] intended to run for reelection as well. So that was the leadership team that we put together, the three of us running together. And to this day feel very good about that. I have no regrets in that regard. I think he was the right leader for the right time. I learned a lot being opposite the president's office and the executive vice-president's office was a great learning experience for me in terms of how the union can be better. We did a lot of creative things together. I feel very positive about the changes we made to the Strategic Industry Funds. And, asking me to reflect on them now, there were an awful lot of things that we did, changing the diversity of the board.

Debbie [00:51:35] Okay. We're going to talk about that. I just want to stop for one minute. That says a huge amount about you. The way in which you and Larry sat down and had that discussion and instead of it becoming a battle between the two of you, you figured out what was best for the union. That says a lot about you.

Jeff [00:52:00] I don't want to blow my own horn. But I felt confident I could have won that race. I could have been elected president of CWA because it was still predominately telephone and I think the telephone votes would have gravitated to the guy who came up from the telephone company. But it wasn't the right thing for the union in two ways. Number one, I thought Larry was a better candidate for president, would make a better president than I. But secondly, it wasn't worth dividing this union, we're trying to bring this union together now. And there's already sort of this sense on the telephone side of these interlopers coming in and taking our union away from us. I thought that would be incredibly divisive for us. And then on reflection, do you let your own ego sort of supplant that? I think my strongest suit is my own self sense of self-awareness. I feel very comfortable knowing who I am and what I'm capable of and more importantly, what I'm not capable of. And so in that discussion with Larry, I felt going into the discussion he was the best choice for president and coming out of it, on reflection it was absolutely the right choice.

Debbie [00:53:23] Well, as an interviewer and a friend of yours, I want to make other statements, but I won't. But I am going to ask you a question and you can say that it's impertinent and not answer it. Do you sometimes have regrets that you never served as president of CWA?

Jeff [00:53:45] Yes, I absolutely do. I don't think that's impertinent. I think all of us reflect back on our careers, could we have done this? Should we have done that? I retired. Well. I was having some health issues which turned out to be not as serious as they might have been. I mean, literally, just before I ran for executive vice-president I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer, stage three thyroid cancer and had a thyroidectomy. Everything went well. But, that's sort of lingering that would be back. And then I started suffering from Meniere's disease where I would get these out of nowhere, these bouts of vertigo that just were immobilizing for a day or two at a time. I had this great fear of having one while I was on an airplane flying somewhere. I would become incredibly nauseous. It was horrible. And the fact my first grandchild was born sort of motivated me to say, okay, I am going to retire. But the other intervening factor was I was really trying to open a spot for the next generation of leadership. I genuinely wanted Seth Rosen to be the next president of CWA. And, with all due deference to Chris Shelton, if Seth hadn't been in the background, I probably would have stayed. Larry wanted me to stay. Larry offered to retire if I would run for president and I said no. He was still the better president. He said, well, he was going to retire after the last term that he had. And he said, you would be the president then. At the time we were also promoting an issue on the board to cap the age that you could run for office as a national leader, that once you reached your 65th birthday, you could no longer run for reelection. It would be sort of informal, the UAW does this, and it's to try and refresh the organization on a regular basis. And so we're advocates for that. And I told Larry, well if we do that, then you run for another term, I run with you for that other term, and I become president. Then I'm president for one term. That's not really what the union needs. The union needs a little bit of continuity. I think a president needs to have a couple of terms to really sort of get their program in place to make that kind of difference. I don't think just one term is sufficient to do that. So I decided I would retire, again, with hopes that Seth would be the president. But things changed, they didn't approve that 65 amendment. They did, I think, but then they changed it. And I forget all the circumstances around it. But it also was an opportunity. I was asked to look at the structure of CWA as secretary-treasurer, I was secretary-treasurer at the time. I ran one term as executive vice-president and then one term as secretary-treasurer when Barbara Easterling retired.

Debbie [00:57:35] So let's just get those dates. You were EVP 2005.

Jeff [00:57:40] Through 2008.

Debbie [00:57:42] And then you were secretary-treasurer

Jeff [00:57:47] 2008 until my retirement. Was it a 3 or 4 year term? I don't remember now. I don't remember when we went to four-year terms, might have been four years, so it might have been 2012. Let's see. When did we last have a CWA election? Was that last year?

Debbie [00:58:06] Yeah. But things might have changed.

Jeff [00:58:09] Yes. I don't know. Any rate.

Debbie [00:58:11] We'll go back and look. So your retirement was around 2011 or 2012. [It was 2011]. Okay. And I interrupted you. I lost your train of thought.

Jeff [00:58:24] I did, too.

Debbie [00:58:27] You were talking about being secretary-treasurer, I think.

Jeff [00:58:30] Right. As secretary-treasurer, you're dealing with the budgets and the economic issues. We had a pension plan at CWA that for years we'd make annual contributions to, but at one point during the late [19]90s or maybe early [19]90s interest rates were so high that we were making enough money off of interest to cover the pension exposure that we had for the workforce at CWA, the CWA union workforce. So I came on as executive vice-president in 2005. I become secretary-treasurer in 2008. And of course, what happens in 2008? Markets crash and interest rates start to bottom out. So now we have this huge gap in what we owe the pension plan versus what our pension liability number is. So trying to figure out those budgets in that structure was a challenge. And one of the things we could look at in the short-term were some of the redundancies that we had at the upper levels of CWA. So we had a president, executive vice-president, and a secretary-treasurer. The executive vice-president role really could be filled by my staff, frankly. It was a nice elected role, but you didn't automatically become president if something happened to the president. At one point, we had three executive vice-presidents and we'd narrowed it down to one. It just kind of made sense to eliminate that position so we eliminated that position. I announced my retirement. Annie Hill, who was the executive vice-president at the time would then run for secretary-treasurer, and she and Larry ran together as a team then in 2008 when I retired or 2011 when I retired. But there were financial issues. Part of that also we merged two of the districts together, Districts Two and 13. Tried to talk to a few others about merging and I thought perhaps making a sacrifice at the top level would inspire some others to work together. It didn't. But the thought was there that we could try and engender that notion with other parts of CWA as well.

Jeff [01:01:45] It was an interesting time. It was a fascinating time. I really enjoyed my time in D.C. at headquarters. It was just this great learning experience with some brilliant people. The headquarters staff, too many people in CWA kind of look at headquarters as being sort of this, oh, that's them. They don't really know what's going on in the real world. But the reality is, yes, they really have a pretty good pulse on what's going on. These are really smart, smart people that are up there and do a great job of shepherding the union in a positive direction. So I felt good about my time up there.

Debbie [01:02:31] You and Larry were quite a team. I think you've described each of your strengths. And so my sense is, while your responsibility was the financial side of the union, you really functioned as a team as leaders of the union.

Jeff [01:02:51] That's right.

Debbie [01:02:52] We've talked in these interviews about the establishment of the Strategic Industry Funds, which was under your leadership. I think it was 2006 or 2007 that passed the convention. And my sense is that you played a huge role in figuring out how to craft it and sell it to the membership. So while we've talked about it before in these interviews, I think that particular piece of it, how to craft it and sell it [to the membership]. So maybe you need to repeat what it is and then talk a little bit about that crafting and selling.

Jeff [01:03:39] When Larry and I were first elected as a team, and I don't want to leave Barbara [Easterling] out of this, because she was a partner as well. But the strategic planning part of it was principally myself and Larry. The president's office staff, George Kohl, Yvette Herrera played huge key roles in this. Sitting down trying to figure out, well, how do we as a union be more effective in dealing with some of the different challenges we have. We've got sort of these geographic structures

within CWA that really don't make that much sense going forward versus dealing with industries strategically, which is more of a European model, if you will. But it's just a small fraction of it. But we thought, well how do we do that? Can we take some of the dues money and bump the dues? And then also we had a huge Members Relief Fund that was sitting over here that wasn't going to be, well, go ahead. You were going to say something.

Debbie [01:05:07] I just wanted you to explain what the Members Relief Fund is.

Jeff [01:05:10] Okay. Yes. So it was basically, for lack of a better term, a strike fund. If a unit was going to go on strike, it was a way to give a stipend, if you will, to striking workers to help them continue to put food on the table at least. Maybe hold off the wolves at the door for some other bills. But it was there if there was a medical emergency as well, we could cover the cost of that if the employer had severed health care plans. And we had I don't remember the numbers now, but millions of dollars sitting in this Fund. And frankly, strikes as a tool had become less and less a part of the arsenal, if you will, of negotiating contracts. Larry and I had seen a few years earlier a way to try to create a different path for bargaining. This goes back to my time as vice-president. I called Larry and said, look, there's a lot of pent-up anger within the workforce at Ameritech. This was part of SBC at the time. And we're in contract negotiations. I think we need some way to let off some steam and also give rank-and-file members some ownership of the collective bargaining process. So I proposed a one-week strike. We brought Andy Milburn, who was the vice-president of District Six at the time. And I don't remember, I should have looked this up to see if Pacific Tel was already part of SBC or not.

Debbie [01:07:21] They were.

Jeff [01:07:23] Okay. So we must have talked to probably Tony Bixler [District 6 vice-president] at the time. But I specifically remember Andy and I meeting with Larry in DC and proposing the strike and they sort of crafted it. It wasn't exactly what I had I had proposed. They turned it into, I think, a four-day strike over a weekend, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday. They objected to that because I didn't think the sacrifice was equal, because frankly, the only people working on Saturdays and Sundays were operators, which we had at the time. They would be sacrificing more than technicians and service reps who would only be out on Friday and Monday. But anyway, the notion was to give everybody some ownership of this collective bargaining process. More so than leveraging the company, although that was sending a message to the company as well that we could put some pressure on. And so we did that. I think it was a big success. We got a contract on the heels of that pretty quickly afterwards that was really terrific at the time.

Jeff [01:08:38] But I've digressed. We had this great [Members Relief Fund and so it became more and more clear that this Fund was growing every year over year over year and we just weren't drawing down from it. So what is the point of trying to build a union and sitting on this money on the incredibly rare chance that that we could draw it down to zero. The fact of the matter was if we ever got into that sort of Armageddon battle that Fund probably wouldn't do the job either. So let's take some of that money and let's put it to good use, helping to build the collective bargaining structure, doing things that help to build the union. And so that took some doing. This was largely Larry's notion. I give him all the credit for this. Part of my job was to go around and again play on this notion, I'm the telephone guy. I came out of the telephone industry. So make the telephone people feel comfortable with it. So I toured around all the different district meetings, meeting with different locals and talking about it and selling it to them. And we actually got it done. We thought we probably could have reached a little higher, as it turns out. But, we got it done and we created these Strategic Industry Funds and we've sort of amended them a couple of times over the over the past few years, once when I was still there and then again since I left, that make them much, much

more proactive in terms of building power within the union. So I feel very, very good about that. I think that was the first year. So I think we'd just been elected in 2005. So I think it probably was the 2006 convention because we really wanted to hit the ground running with some bold ideas and ideas for change within CWA.

Debbie [01:10:51] I think you've got the date right, because I remember two of the early programs that were funded out of this was the Speed Matters: Broadband for All project and the Health Care Reform and then the Employee Free Choice Act. And then I believe a lot of prep for big or small contract negotiations. So I think one of the things that hasn't been captured in all these interviews for somebody who may not understand, is the CWA operating budget funded the staff, whether in headquarters or in the districts. And that was kind of the limit because there wasn't a whole lot of extra operating funds from the members' dues. So when there were big campaigns that would require taking members off the job for training, taking members off the job for mobilization, for political action, and then hiring some staff to run these programs. That was what the Strategic Industry Funds enabled and then eventually another fund called the Growth Fund expanded this to other areas as well.

Jeff [01:12:22] We recognized that you really had to silo those funds. If we were going to take those dollars, we couldn't just put them into budgets because they would get cannibalized by representation work because that was a big part of what the CWA budget was, it was representation, servicing the contracts we had. Some sliver of that went to organizing, but the vast majority was set aside for representation. And if you just took those [Strategic Industry Fund] dollars and moved them into budgets, we would just grow that piece of it and we wouldn't be doing the job. We recognized we needed to silo those funds to do special projects, to do the things that we couldn't get done otherwise. You mentioned three key ones right there that that would have never happened. We would have come up with a program called Speed Matters or Health Care for All. We would have come up with something, but we would have tried to staff it with some of the existing staff and we wouldn't have been able to finance it the way that we were able to. So that was a huge part of the thinking behind us was to separate it so that you had to do bold different things that you weren't doing day in and day out.

Debbie [01:13:47] Do you have any criticisms of this?

Jeff [01:13:54] No. I think we could have been bolder. I think we could have pulled more dollars into that. As part of trying to craft a proposal that would get adopted, the Defense Fund had an oversight committee and so we said that the Defense Fund Oversight Committee would have to approve any of the budget items that we were going to put forward. I wasn't crazy about that at first, but I think in hindsight, that wasn't a bad thing because I think it made us think more about how the rank-and-file was going to react to it. So that was sort of a sounding board for that so that it wasn't just in the CWA executive board room. It was actually these rank-and-file local leaders who populate the Defense Fund Oversight Committee. I sort of resented that at the time because we'd come up with these bold ideas and they'd kind of shoot some of them down and so I'd get a little frustrated with that at times. But in hindsight, I don't think that's overall a bad thing. I think that actually causes us to think more deeply about how do we attack these problems and how do we engage the locals in helping us attack those problems. So that was probably a good thing. Again. I just think bolder is better and in retrospect would have probably reached higher than we did in terms of the dollar amounts to make that kind of difference. CWA is an interesting union. I spent a lot of time on the state of Ohio AFL-CIO executive board. Interacted on the national AFL-CIO executive board. And it's interesting the dues structures of a lot of these unions. The majority of the unions, the bulk of the dues income goes directly to the national union and a much, much smaller share goes to the local unions. And so you get a lot of unions like AFSCME or SEIU that have these

huge public profiles because they've got these much bigger national budgets. For example, in Ohio, the AFSCME locals probably get around 10% of the dues money that's collected. At CWA the majority of the dues money actually goes to the locals. The locals administer the majority of CWA dues.

Debbie [01:16:45] What is it, 60%?

Jeff [01:16:48] Yes, 60/40 split. The majority goes to the local unions and it has positives and negatives. So the positive is I think we've got a stronger community base in a lot of instances because we have got stronger locals. The negative is we don't have as big a national profile or ability to influence nationally. So the Strategic Industry Funds were an attempt to try and do that so that CWA would become a larger player to be able to make differences on big issues like health care, like Internet dispersion. And with that goal in mind, I think we've stepped up on that stage in a way that we hadn't in the past.

Debbie [01:17:39] As long as we're reflective about CWA as a union. How would you describe CWA as a democratic union and the pluses and if there's any --

Jeff [01:18:05] If you've been to a CWA convention, it's a very democratic operation. I've been to conventions of other unions and ours, by contrast, is really an exercise in democracy. On the other hand, the leadership of CWA isn't elected directly by the membership. It's elected by representatives that they elect and then go on and elect [the leadership]. And so you can make arguments on both sides of that, it can be a good thing and then again it can lead to some demagoguery to try and get elected on a national stage. You look at the recent example of the UAW that went to direct membership election and they elected Shawn Fain, who came out of nowhere, basically, didn't have an existing leadership role, defeated the existing incumbent because of direct membership election. So you'd say, well, that's a great example, but there are just as many examples of somebody who just campaigns on issues that you can't deliver on or that just serve as dividing the union and getting people frustrated. At the end of the day, I'm still in favor of our representative form of democracy, where the locals elect the representatives that then attend the convention and then make that decision because I think you get you get a little more reasoned and informed election process as a result.

Debbie [01:20:00] What about the checks and balances that are so critical to protecting any democracy? How do those operate in the union?

Jeff [01:20:09] Again, I feel CWA has got exactly the right sort of structure. You could beef it up maybe, but the right sort of structure to make sure that people's voices get heard. So the appeals process where a local member could actually appeal a decision, as an example [whether or not to take a grievance to arbitration] that affects them all the way to the convention itself is unusual. You don't see that in many other unions. I think that one part serves as a check on power. But also I think that bringing in all these different diverse groups also does that as well with the merger partners. And then finally, one of the things I just skimmed over for a moment was diversifying the board as well and making sure that the board becomes more reflective of who CWA's membership is in terms of sex and race. I think we've done a better job of that. I'm trying to think of who was on the executive board when I was first elected as a local officer. I can't think of a woman that was on the board and there were certainly no African-Americans on the board back in 1971 or 1972 when I first became a local officer.

Debbie [01:21:51] Not until Dina Beaumont came in which was a little bit after that.

Jeff [01:21:56] Right. And that was only because she was a merger partner. She brought in a huge block of votes [operators in southern California]. And so in order to get these members in, we're going to give you a board seat. But that really cracked the door open at least.

Debbie [01:22:16] So do you want to mention briefly -- We've talked about the diversity board members, but that was under your and Larry and Barbara Easterling's leadership.

Jeff [01:22:27] Right.

Debbie [01:22:28] How did you sell that to the membership?

Jeff [01:22:32] I think it wasn't as hard a sell as we thought it might be because I think the membership also recognized we're at a very different time and that we need to recognize all the different voices that exist within the union. This can't just be a bunch of old white men sitting around deciding what's best for you. That you need to have all of the different voices within the union heard. So whether it's by employment discipline, sex, race, gender identity, try to consciously make sure that we reach out and get everybody engaged. We talked about different paths to try and do that. Do you just say, okay, the CWA minority caucus can have a board seat or the women's conference can have a board seat. But what we finally settled on was using the existing geography and merging a couple of districts together to elect different diversity board members. And I think it's worked out. I think we've gotten a nice dispersion of diversity on the board as a result. I'll go back to what I was talking about with the Defense Fund Oversight Committee. I think there is actually a real value to having rank-and-file voices heard at those board meetings and to have them playing a role where they're not full-time employees of CWA. They have these positions as a result of their election from their region and so they represent not just the diversity of the union in terms of race and sex and gender identity, but they represent a voice of local leadership as well in the field. So I think there's that value. So it was a twofer for us as the way that we saw it. Barbara Easterling was very helpful in promoting that. It was really out of the president's office that the idea was engendered from. But we asked Barbara to sort of champion because she was as old school as you could get out of D.C. at that point and would calm the fears of some of those who thought this was some kind of takeover of the CWA executive board. So she did a great job of promoting, we all did. We all hit the road. But I think her advocacy was instrumental in helping people feel comfortable with it. And again, we thought it would be a bigger lift than it was. The reality was it wasn't. People recognized that that board needed to be more reflective of our union and this was as good a way to do that as any.

Debbie [01:26:08] Well, you did a good job of educating way before the vote. But I just find it fascinating that the union really struggled for decades how do we increase the diversity, particularly the racial diversity? Also gender diversity, but particularly racial diversity on the board. And an earlier concept was the Minority Leadership Institute, in which local leaders would spend several weeks getting trained with the concept that then they would have the skills to rise to staff and staff then become higher level leaders. That was so slow and was making progress, but not the kind of progress at the top of the union.

Jeff [01:27:06] Right.

Debbie [01:27:06] It's just fascinating, a statement on what one needs to do as an organization to really ensure that diversity happens, not just a goal, but that actually happens. That's my editorial comment.

Jeff [01:27:23] But I think things like the Minority Leadership Institute -- We wanted those trees to grow faster, but they took time. So today we have a union that has two African-Americans leading in the two key leadership positions as president [Claude Cummings] and secretary-treasurer [Ameenah Salaam]. Unthinkable the day that I walked in to the phone company and signed my membership card. You think about the arc of these past 50 years, 50 plus years, and it's been a time of pretty dramatic change. And I can feel good about the small part that I played in it. A lot of people helped to really make that change happen. It's exciting to think that an election at a convention that race no longer is going to be an issue that you could elect an African-American male as president, an African-American female as the secretary-treasurer and do it and have the union feel really good about that at the end of the day. You know those seeds got planted. I hope that I watered it a little bit and now we're, as the old saying goes, now we're able to sit back and enjoy the shade from those trees.

Debbie [01:29:04] So now that segways into the reflective questions that you have asked most of our interviewees. One being, what do you consider one of your biggest achievements within the union?

Jeff [01:29:29] I've thought about this, obviously. I asked the question to a number of the people we've interviewed. I'm torn between sort of a cultural change and then also a structural change. I think I would probably fall on the side of culture change. I firmly believe that you give somebody a job and you trust them to do it. You don't micromanage it. You work with them on developing the idea but then you let them go out and do it. And that was sort of my philosophy when I was vice-president of the district, then executive vice-president, then secretary-treasurer. You try and get the right people in the right spots and then let them go and do what they do best. So I feel good about my role in in changing what the union has been able to accomplish. To change from being a telephone union to being a workers' union. That change didn't come easily. You really had to work at it culturally and make those changes. In terms of actual changes, I would focus on three, I guess. One was card check/neutrality in the Midwest. All three of these, I was a part of, but I can't claim ownership or authorship of any of the three. So there's that one. The Strategic Industry Funds and then the board diversity would be the three that I feel most proud of and feel most proud of having had a role in making those a reality.

Debbie [01:31:52] What an achievement. And disappointments?

Jeff [01:32:01] Yes. I guess I'm a little disappointed that I didn't I didn't stick around in D.C. a little longer. But I can say I enjoy spending time with grandkids. That's been a big joy in my life. And I've done a lot back here in Ohio since I've got back too. Two things. Number one, knowing you have enough and I have enough. Knowing that and then I can go out and do things. I've been offered a number of paying jobs since I retired. I wasn't even 60 years-old when I retired. So I've been offered a number of jobs back here in Ohio. I've turned them all down. I've taken full-time jobs working, but not for a salary because I get a pension. I get a pension that's there because of the union, part of it's from the phone company, part of CWA. But I feel like I've got an obligation to continue to pay back for the fact that I've landed in this fortunate position. I mean, I graduated high school with a C plus average. I took some college courses at night, but I never graduated college. So, I think about how fortunate I've been to be a part of something that's so positive in our culture and in our nation. And that's the labor movement. So I try and do everything I can to pay that back and to continue as long as I can to do things that help build that.

Debbie [01:34:05] I know you have.

Jeff [01:34:07] Yes.

Debbie [01:34:08] So can you put into words what being part of the CWA and the labor movement has meant to you?

Jeff [01:34:20] I don't know. You sort of silo your life a little bit as well. You've got sort of this personal life and then you've got professional life. I think for many people those silos don't have sort of an equal footing. I've always since the first day that I get involved with the union, I've always felt really good about trying to make a difference. And I wish more people could feel that way about the careers that they have. I'm incredibly lucky to have that feeling, to know that I can feel good about doing something. When I grew up, I wanted to be a professional baseball player, (laughs) this pipe dream. Then I get this job at the phone company and it's like, oh, I'm slotted now. This is me for the rest of my life. I'm going to be just this guy at the phone company. And then getting involved in the union was like, wow, I can work and I can feel good about making a difference for other people. That's a great satisfaction. I can't express enough how fortunate I've been to be able to be a part of this union and to help shape, at least in some small way, where it's been and where it's headed.

Debbie [01:36:21] If I were to have posed the question, what is your message for the next generation? I think I think you've answered it.

Jeff [01:36:30] Yes.

Debbie [01:36:31] And I would like to end this on that note, except I have an out-of-left-field question.

Jeff [01:36:41] I thought that was Hannah's job.

Debbie [01:36:43] Hannah will get her chance after I ask this one. You've been a leader in the Midwest from a period when the Midwest was the center of industrial unions and the working class voted Democratic. You've seen that shift. And Michigan, Wisconsin are battleground states. Ohio has now turned red. So I do want to ask you your own reflective thoughts on why that's happened.

Jeff [01:37:21] Yes. There are a number of factors at play. The loss of manufacturing jobs going first south and then offshore angered people and they need to lash out. So you wind up with people who are just incredibly frustrated. Then you get somebody like a Donald Trump who comes in and the message is I'll blow this place up, I'll blow up the way the government functions and they gravitate towards that. We saw that, not just with Trump early on, but we had different examples of Members of Congress who sort of message that here in Ohio. And part of it has a racial component as well. If you can find somebody else to blame for your plight. And so for a lot of the white male manufacturing job base of people blaming diversity for the loss of their jobs, now blaming immigrants for the loss of their jobs becomes a way of pushing the responsibility for where they are off on somebody else, that somebody else did this to me. That's a good part of what's happened outside of the urban areas in Ohio. So, in Cleveland and Columbus and Cincinnati and Dayton we'll still elect Democrats but the rest of the state has just got this anger. That exists in the urban communities as well. I don't want to say it's exclusive to the rest of the state.

Jeff [01:39:38] And in Michigan, it's even more dramatic where you go outside of Detroit and the rest of the state is red. But they've done a better job up there I think of keeping people connected. I think Michigan is still in play because of that. So you have the [Governor] Gretchen Whitmer's of the world plugging in and recognizing, well, there's a path here for us to win these states. And the path is frankly diversity, it isn't blaming diversity for our woes. It's embracing it. And so in

Michigan the top five spots in the state are all women. Just remarkable. And yet we just can't seem to plug into that down here in Ohio. It's an extremely frustrating thing for me. I wish I could figure out a better strategy for how we work our way out of this. But, we have a great senator [Senator Sherrod Brown] who's got a great message, so it proves it can be done. With the right message, you can still win these voters back over. But it's an uphill climb here.

Debbie [01:41:11] Well, that could be a whole other conversation. But thank you. I think that's very helpful. Okay, Hannah, you've been listening to Jeff for months and months. Now's your chance.

Jeff [01:41:23] Yes, right.

Hannah [01:41:28] Something that you often say to people when you interview is that the reason we're doing this is because we missed the chance to do it with Morty Bahr, for example. So I think two names that popped out in this interview were Morty Bahr and Seth Rosen. I'm wondering, because they're not here to tell their stories. If there are stories that you want to tell about them to preserve for the record.

Jeff [01:41:55] Yes. Morty could be at home with anybody. He had such a depth of information, some of it you would have otherwise thought useless. But he could go into a garage full of all white technicians and talk about issues that affected them. And similarly go into an African-American church and relate and be at home. He just had this incredibly great sort of a gift of gab, I guess, but it was bigger than that. It was being able to listen and also then being able to engage. Seth, on the other hand, wasn't as eloquent. I used to tell Seth all the time. I said, Seth, if you would get a haircut and buy a decent suit, you could be president of this union. You know that, right? Right. What do you say? I'd say, look, buy a new pair of shoes. But he could care less about the trappings. He was just this incredibly strategic thinker. He could analyze a problem and figure out a way to not just solve the problem, but engage others in helping to solve the problem, which is much more important, particularly in the union world, in the world of organized labor. How do you engage other people to join your cause and push for it? So he had that ability to do that. And we would sit around my office and talk about different strategies and he'd come up with one or another and I'd go out and push it or promote it and everybody thought I'm this brilliant guy. Well, I'm just the guy. I'm just the spokesperson here. I'm the guy carrying the water. I didn't dig the well. It would be wonderful to have had the ability to sit down with both of them and have this kind of conversation about the union and that's really what sort of motivated me to want to do this so that we could capture some of these stories. And as you know, we've really gotten some terrific stories out of a number of different people about the history of our union. It's not everything. But, when you're working with an extremely limited budget, you do what you can. I hope that at some point -- what was I watching the other night? Somebody said, well, I'm not doing this for us. I'm doing this for the researcher who looks at this stuff 75 or 100 years from now and says, well, what was going on back then? I think it's important to me to capture that. I guess what made me really think about it more was the passing of my grandparents and parents, my parents in particular, and realizing I didn't know a lot of their story. I hadn't asked them a lot of the questions that I'd like to ask them now. This is my way of sort capturing that for somebody else so that somebody else that's got that ability to take a look at what's been going on. Well. I wandered there, but --

Debbie [01:46:07] No, no, no. It was wonderful. So we have time for one more Hannah question.

Jeff [01:46:12] Sure.

Hannah [01:46:18] I don't have another question, but you mentioned that Morty had the gift of gab, no matter what environment he was in. So I'm wondering if there's a specific story you have about

that or if you want to talk about Seth Rosen's strategic thinking and maybe an idea he had that germinated into real change. If you want to follow either of those threads for the next five minutes.

Jeff [01:46:46] That would require me digging into my memory bank in a more specific way. It's one thing to come up with a sort of general notion of that, but then to come up with a specific is --

Debbie [01:47:00] Well, Jeff, in your earlier interviews, you talked a lot about things that you did in your local because you didn't have arbitration and therefore you could do these, what you didn't then call mobilization, but they were mobilizations. I am guessing that Seth was part of that.

Jeff [01:47:24] Yes. So this goes back really to the split of the local because that's when Seth came into prominence. I was already in the staff when the local split and Seth became sort of the leader of the faction that was wanting to put the local back together. He and John Ryan. What had happened. John Ryan had defeated Lily Holt, who was the incumbent president, defeated her for president. Lily went and got a motion on the floor I think to have a referendum vote to split the local. Lily was an African-American woman and came out of the Yellow Pages group and had sort of that as their base and split off the service reps from the rest of the clerical in the in the local. It went all the way to the convention to conduct another referendum to put the local back together. Seth was the leader, along with John Ryan and a few others, of making that happen and putting together that convention strategy that really outflanked [vice-president] Marty [Hughes] and those that were supporting Lily's group even though there were more votes on Lily's side. On the John Ryan/Seth Rosen side there weren't as many. But they just put together a brilliant campaign within the union at the convention to make that happen. And a lot of the District Four staff were angry with them for bucking the District office. But, I had this admiration for what they'd been able to accomplish. They had a small group that really sort of moved the entire convention in a direction that was in opposition to where the leadership of the union had been. Marty had the entire board and [president] Glen Watts supporting that this local should be split. And they beat that. Okay, these are guys we've got to be on the same team with. I've got to work with them to bring them into the fold here. So I spent a few years then sort of rehabilitating the relationship there. And when Marty left that obviously was a big hurdle. So we were able to get over that and then convincing [vice-president] Bob [Johnson] to put Seth on the staff was the final sort of hurdle of getting through that.

Debbie [01:50:32] Well, I'm not sure that my question diverted from what Hannah was seeking, which was the touch in the field. Because of this hard stop, I'm just going to [stop here.] We could go on and on. Jeff, all I can do is thank you for your leadership. Thank you for the person you are, a very rare leader who can recognize how to put the mission ahead of your personal ego. I have so many other questions, but I'm going to stop here.